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ABSTRACT

Freewriting is an effective means of teaching students how to develop persona in writing. One approach is to have students imagine that they are inanimate objects or nonhuman creatures, provide them with a specific situation or environment, and ask them to freewrite for five to ten minutes. Another slant is to have them become famous historical figures facing a famous historical event. If it is accepted that the personal appeal of the speaker/writer is the strongest means of persuasion, then it is important to teach students how to create such appeals. After letting students experiment with persona through freewriting, it is easy to plug the concept of persona into an overall rhetorical scheme. This can be done by requiring students to establish in one of their essays a persona that is something other than themselves. Freewriting is no rhetorical panacea; however, it is a way to give students "hands on" practice. (DC)

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Teaching Persona Through Freewriting

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Level:

High school and college

Author's Comment:

Ever since I came across Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers* I have been an enthusiastic advocate and practitioner of freewriting. At first I could see only the immediate applications of freewriting to the rhetorical process, that of pre-writing and generating ideas; however, in the last several years I have used freewriting as a means of teaching persona.

My approach is akin to prosopopoeia; in effect, I have my students imagine they are an inanimate object or nonhuman creature. Then I place them in a specific situation or environment and ask them to freewrite for five to ten minutes. Some of the personas and situations I have asked them to tackle include the following:

1. Persona: a mischievous vending machine
   Situation: before a distraught customer

2. Persona: any organ of the body
   Situation: the morning after a particularly hard night

3. Persona: the back seat of a car
   Situation: a "hot" date

4. Persona: a spoiled pet
   Situation: seated in the lap of its master, surrounded by a room full of hostile people

Here is an example of what one student did with the last persona/situation:

> Hi. I am a spoiled pet. I like being a spoiled pet. In fact it thrills me to the max. I am so spoiled that no one else likes me! This has given me a terrible complex. So my master has to spoil me more in order to help me over this complex. Right now I am sitting in my red velvet lined basket with real goose feather pillows waiting for my master to finish broiling my T-bone steak. I don't like my steaks fried because that grease isn't healthy. So I make my master broil them. Much more healthy you know. For him too because if he doesn't fix my food the way I like it I bite him. Hard. On the leg. Where it hurts. Do you know who my hero is? My hero is Garfield the cat. Isn't he great? Now that is a spoiled pet if I ever saw one. He absolutely dominates

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his master Jon. That is the level that I am aspiring to achieve. Another role model of mine is Miss Piggy. She is so, so chic. You know what I mean? Arrogant, vain, and utterly adorable.

Of course there are countless personas that could be suggested. For instance, students have "become" coins, abused animals, bathroom walls, welcome mats, beds, video games, mirrors and so on. Another slant on this is to have them become famous historical figures, facing a famous historical event. (Napoleon at Waterloo or Joan of Arc at the stake for example).

Having students attempt such masking is a very effective way of teaching the importance of persona in the writing process. For if we accept the Aristotelian notion that the personal appeal of the speaker/writer is the strongest means of persuasion, then it behooves us to teach our students how to create such appeals. After letting our students experiment with creating persona through freewriting, it is easy to plug the concept of persona into an overall rhetorical scheme. I do this by requiring my students to establish in at least one of their essays an unusual persona; one that is something other than themselves, the so-called "real me."

This kind of freewriting exercise has led to one of the best essays I have received in recent years. After several weeks of persona freewriting exercises, a student composed a deliberative essay in the vein of "A Modest Proposal." Entitled "Let's Turn Welfare Recipients into Slaves," the essay managed to refute opponents of the welfare system through its controlled analysis and seemingly sane but exaggerated persona. But this essay was just one of many excellent ones that were generated primarily through getting students aware of and involved in persona through freewriting.

No, freewriting is no rhetorical panacea. Nor am I saying that freewriting is the only way to teach persona; instead I am saying that in addition to discussions of the idea and readings of essays that illustrate particular personas, we ought to assign freewriting to give our students "hands on" practice. After all, if we can teach them how to create interesting, believable, and sincere personas, we will have gone a long way towards helping them to be better and more effective writers.